

# The Gunmaker Of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

## CHAPTER XII.

A CONFERENCE AND HOW IT WAS INTERRUPTED.

Rosalind Valda and Zenobie were together in their sitting room, and the former had been weeping. She looked paler than when we saw her before, and her brow was heavy. Smiles no longer crept about the dimples of her cheeks, and her eyes had a sad, mournful look. Her face plainly showed that she had suffered much.

"My dear mistress," urged the faithful Zenobie, throwing her arms about Rosalind's neck and drawing her head upon her bosom, "weep no more. Oh, there must be some hope! Surely God will not suffer such an unholy work to be done."

"Ah, Zenobie," returned the fair maiden in a fluttering, melancholy tone, "where can I look for hope?"

"I say in God. You have told me we must look to him, and I have believed you. Have you not always been good to God?"

"I have been as good as I knew how, though I have sinned."

"How sinned? Oh, my mistress, if you have sinned, then who is pure? Tell me."

"We all sin, Zenobie. It is our nature."

"So I have often heard, but I hardly think you have sinned. What have you done which you knew to be wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"Then how have you sinned?"

"Ah, Zenobie, we all do things which we ought not to do. But yet I mean to do as near right as I can."

"Then leave the rest with God. Oh, when poor mortals do as near right as lies in their power, surely they may leave the rest with God without fear. And now, if God is just, as you tell me, why should he allow the wicked duke to triumph over you? What justice would there be in that when you are all goodness and he is sin itself?"

Rosalind was puzzled. She had tried to teach her attendant to love and honor God, and she had so far succeeded that Zenobie understood all the principles of Christianity and embraced them gladly and joyfully. But now how should she make this point understood? How should she reconcile this apparent injustice with God's universal mercy and justice?

"Can you not tell me?" the young girl asked again. "Why should God allow such a thing? You say he is all powerful and can do what he wills."

"Zenobie," returned the maiden after pondering for awhile, "you do not look at the subject in a proper light. God does not operate by petty, individual decisions, as an emperor does. He sees that certain laws are necessary for the good of mankind, and not a single law of all his code is there but is very good. Last night your head ached, and you suffered, and, of course, you had violated some natural law. It was your own fault. And so this suffering which is now come upon me is the result of a violation of one of God's laws."

"Ah," cried Zenobie eagerly, "but you are the one who suffers while another violates the law. In my case I did both and do not complain."

"But listen," pursued Rosalind, with a brightening countenance, for the true idea had come to her mind. "It would not be just for a person to enjoy all the good of a law and leave others to suffer all the evil. God has established in us a social nature, and through that part of our nature come the sweetest of our earthly enjoyments. Such a law—the law of sociality—must be universal, and if men break that law they must suffer, and the only just way in which God could shield me from suffering would be to release me from the effects of the law. Then I should be a poor, lonesome outcast, forced to live all my days alone like a barren rock upon the top of some bleak mountain. But I would rather live among people and enjoy the companionship of my fellows. I have freely accepted the boon, and now, when its evils come, I must suffer. Had God's intent been followed out there would have been no suffering. It is not his fault that the duke sins. Do you understand me?"

"I don't know," murmured the young girl dubiously.

"But, see," resumed Rosalind. "You choose to exercise your social nature, and of your own accord you mingle among your fellows. Do you not see that thus you are enjoying one of God's richest blessings?"

"I don't know," murmured the young girl dubiously.

and love?"

"Yes, I see."

"Well, so far God is good in having given you that power for such enjoyment?"

"Yes, I see."

"Well, now, under that law, when my father and mother died I found a friend in the duke and here have found a home. But circumstances have changed. The duke has become wicked in thought—he wants more money—and he will prostitute a power which in obedience of God's law would be good to my ruin. Now, God cannot save me without rendering to pieces one of his most powerful laws and one which is meant for a universal good. The moment he does that he destroys that principle of human dependence whence flow those most holy virtues of love, friendship and charity. He must act by universal laws and not by partial rules and individual exceptions. So as long as I can enjoy the blessings of social life I must be subject to the evils of treachery and social wickedness. Do you not understand now?"

"I see, I see," the girl murmured thoughtfully.

"Aye, Zenobie," the mistress added, while a holy light shone upon her countenance, "God has made us subject to ills here. But look beyond the grave, and how bright it is with hope! I have a father and a mother there. Oh, in all my misery, even in the worst state to which the bad duke can reduce me, I would not change places with him. You seemed to intimate that God would see me suffer and yet let the duke triumph. Triumph? Oh, Zenobie, for what would you have that man's heart in your bosom and his soul in your keeping?"

"I would rather die," the girl cried, while a cold shudder ran through her frame.

"Then, you see, he does not go clear. Oh, how blind and simple are those who imagine there can be pleasure in sin!"

This opened a new theme to Zenobie's mind, and she pondered upon it a long while. But by and by she came back to the theme from whence they had started, and in pursuance thereof she said:

"My mistress, are you sure the duke will persist in this?"

"Aye, Zenobie; I know he will," Rosalind answered, while the old shudder came back to her frame and the old grief to her soul.

"And have you no hope?"

"Only one—in Ruric. He may help me."

"Oh, I hope he can! He is a noble man."

Rosalind answered with a look of gratitude, and Zenobie proceeded:

"Where is the titled lord more noble than he? Oh, were I to choose a husband now and he was free and I was in your position I'd choose Ruric Nevel before all the emperors of earth."

"So would I," returned the fair maiden.

"If I were a countess, as you are, oh, how I should love to make such a man a count!"

"But my marrying him would not make him a count. Were he a count and I like what he is now in station his marrying me would give me the title. But we poor women do not have that power."

"Well, then, we should so much more have the right to choose our own husbands."

Rosalind made no oral answer, but her look showed that she sympathized with the sentiment.

"My mistress," at length spoke Zenobie again, this time in a low whisper, "why may we not leave this place?"

Rosalind started as though she had heard the speech of a spirit, and for a moment a look of hope gleamed upon her face. But it quickly passed away.

"Alas, where should we go?"

This was a part of the plan which Zenobie had not thought of, and ere she could make any reply one of the female domestics entered the apartment and announced that a woman wished to see her young mistress. Rosalind asked who it was, but the girl could only tell her that it was a middle aged woman and very good looking. The young countess bade Zenobie go down and conduct her up. Ere long afterward the attendant returned, and with her came Claudia Nevel. Rosalind had not seen the good woman for over a year, but she knew her at once, and, starting up from her seat, she bounded forward and embraced her warmly.

"Ah, Aunt Claudia, I am glad you have come! You will let me call on you as I did in those happy

times long gone by?"

"Aye, sweet Rosalind," returned the widow, imprinting a warm kiss upon the fair white brow.

The countess noticed the strange sadness of the woman's tone, and then, for the first time also, she noticed the sadness of her look.

"Aunt Claudia, you look sad," she said, while a chill dread struck to her own heart.

"Aye," the widow uttered, as though she were afraid to venture the question she wished to ask; "I have been very sad because I have had a terrible fear. Has—has not Ruric been here?"

"When?" uttered the maiden, catching the whole fear now.

"Within these three days."

"Just then. Day before yesterday he was here—in the forenoon."

"And I have not seen him since!" the poor woman groaned.

"Not seen him? Ruric gone? Oh, where, where?"

"He said he was going to see the Count Damonoff when he left here," interposed Zenobie, who joined in the grief.

"Aye; so he told me," returned the mother. "I have been there, and they have not seen him since that evening. The surgeon who attends the count went out to the inn where Ruric put up his horse, and the animal was still there, his owner having not called for him."

"O God, have mercy!" ejaculated the young countess in a paroxysm of grief.

At this moment there came a rap upon the door, and Zenobie went to answer the summons. It was the black monk, Vladimir, who thus demanded admittance. At any other time both Rosalind and Claudia might have been startled by the strange visit, but now they instinctively hailed his coming as a source of hope.

"Ladies," spoke the fat monk, approaching the spot where they stood and bowing very low, "you will pardon this unseemly method of gaining admission here, but I had no other choice, for I feared the duke would refuse me did I apply to him. I have come to learn, if possible, where Ruric Nevel may be."

The widow tried to answer, but instead of speaking she burst into tears. Rosalind struggled a moment with the deep emotions that stirred within her, and she, too, fell to weeping. Zenobie was obliged to answer.

"Good father," said she, "we here are after the same knowledge. His poor mother has come here to try if she might find some clew to the noble youth, and thus did my mistress gain the first intelligence that he was gone. Pray, good sir, do you know anything about him? What have you heard?"

Both Claudia and the young countess now raised their heads, for they would hear what reply the monk could make.

"I only know that he is missing," Vladimir replied. "A little while ago I called upon the sick count, and there I learned that Ruric Nevel had mysteriously disappeared, and I learned also of the noble purpose for which he visited the count."

"Aye," interposed Claudia, with sudden energy; "he went to try to gain the count's forgiveness. I don't think they spoke falsely there. I don't think any there would wish him harm from any lingering revenge."

"No, no!" returned the monk. "His mission thither was most nobly fulfilled. So far from cherishing any spirit of revenge is the count that he will ever bear for Ruric the holiest gratitude of his soul."

"Do you think so?" the widow asked hopefully.

"I know it," was the monk's assured reply. "But," he continued, relapsing into perplexity, "I cannot imagine what has become of him. But hold! My dear child, is there not a humpbacked, ungainly priest who sometimes visits your guardian?"

This was addressed to Rosalind, and a fearful tremor shook her frame as she heard it, for its import was at once apparent.

"Do you suspect?"—She had started forward and grasped the monk's arm as she thus commenced, but she could not continue. The thought she would have uttered was terrible.

"Go on," whispered Vladimir, bending his head low down so as to catch her very thoughts if they left her lips. "What would you say?"

"Oh, I ought not, and yet I know his soul is capable even of that." Thus much the fair countess murmured to herself, and then she gazed up and spoke to the strange man before her.

"Do you suspect my guardian?"

"Do you suspect him?" the monk returned.

"Oh, I know not what to think!"

"But listen," resumed Vladimir earnestly. "I would know all that you know, and then perhaps I can assist you. Fear not, for as true as God lives I mean to save Ruric if I can, and if I can but gain a clew to him now I can surely save you both. Trust me, for I possess a wondrous power for the good of those who trust me. Now, what end could the duke have in view in wishing for

Ruric's removal? I know what he had in view in concocting the duel—it was the death of Damonoff and the undivided possession of Drotzen. Now, answer me, what does he aim at now?"

In spite of all doubts Rosalind found herself trusting the monk. There was an air of conscious truth and power in his look and tone that won upon her.

"Good father," she returned after a few moments' thought, "the duke has sworn by a most fearful oath that he will have me for his wife!"

"Ha!" uttered the monk, starting back a pace and clenching his hands.

"Does he mean that?"

"Oh, most truly he does!" the young countess replied, and she spoke more firmly now, for there was something in the sudden energy of the monk's exclamation that gave her hope.

"Then he wants your estates too. By my soul, he is aiming for wealth with a high hand! And do you suppose he fears Ruric Nevel in connection with this scheme?"

"Yes, father—I will speak plainly, for I trust you. I do not think you would betray one who never harmed you."

"Let the end of these things tell you that. But now finish what you had begun—about your thoughts of the duke."

"He knows, holy father, that I love Ruric, and he knows, too, that Ruric loves me. May he not under such circumstances fear that the noble youth will try to thwart him?"

"Very likely," returned Vladimir thoughtfully. "I will profit by this, and I am much mistaken if you do not also profit by it. I have those in Moscow who will work for me. I cannot, of course, directly assure you of salvation, for Ruric may never be found."

A quick groan escaped from Claudia's lips as the monk thus spoke, but before Rosalind could speak the door of the apartment was opened, and the Duke of Tula strode in! He stopped as he came nigh to where the company stood, and his eyes flashed and his frame trembled with passion.

"How now?" he cried as soon as he could command speech. "What means this gathering here in my own palace? Meddling monk, how dare you drag your detestable form hither? Out, reptile, out! And let me catch you here again and my dogs shall tear you up as they do carrion!"

Without a word the monk turned away. His face was pale as death and his hands were clinched till the fingers' ends seemed to settle themselves into the palms.

"Remember," the duke exclaimed as Vladimir reached the door, "if you dare to cross my door stool again!"

"Hold!" gasped the monk in a hoarse, startling tone. "Offer no more threats. But, mark me, proud duke, you shall see the day on which you'll wish God had made you a dog ere he gave you speech to arouse the just vengeance of Vladimir!"

Thus speaking, the black monk disappeared. Olga started to pursue him, but he did not follow out the impulse. Ere he reached the door he stopped and turned back.

"And you, woman, who art thou?" he uttered, turning an angry look upon Claudia.

"I am a mourning mother in search of her lost son," the woman sadly replied.

"Ha! I see the likeness now. You are the woman Nevel, mother of the young villain who bears that name! Leave my palace at once, and don't you dare to enter it again!"

The poor woman tried to speak, but she could not. With a deep sob, she turned away and slowly walked from the room.

"Now," resumed the duke, turning toward Rosalind, "what means this secret council?"

"My lord," returned the countess, struggling hard to overcome her powerful emotions, "they were here—to—to—"

But she could not finish the sentence. Her soul was too deeply moved. She only gave the foul wretch one look of horror and disgust, and then, covering her face with her hands, she sobbed aloud.

If the bad man had anything further to say, he reserved it for some future time.

## CHAPTER XIII.

THE PLOTTER IS AT WORK.

Count Conrad Damonoff was able to sit up. He was in a great stuffed chair, playing with a favorite dog, while near by him sat Stephen Urzen. The young nobleman had gained rapidly since the visit of Ruric, for the antidotes he had taken had proved efficient, and he soon came back to the point he had reached before the administering of the poison.

"Stephen," he said, pushing his dog gently from him, "has anything been heard yet from Ruric Nevel?"

"Not that I know of," returned Urzen.

"Oh, I wish I were able to assist in the search! But have you heard anything of what suspicions may be floating?"

"Only that the humpbacked priest

is looked upon by some as having had some hand in it."

"Ha! And how does suspicion point toward him?"

"Why, in no direct way, I believe. I cannot understand it. All I know is he is suspected."

The count pondered a few moments, and he thought he could see it. Urzen did not know the secret of his friend's strange relapse, for that had been kept private. So he had no clew to the priest's true character, as the count possessed.

"I believe the fellow is a villain," Urzen resumed. "He is surely a villainous looking man."

"So he is," responded the count.

"I never saw such a wicked look before in any human face."

"Ah!" uttered a voice close by the door. "Who comes in for the flattering remark, my friend?"

Both the count and Stephen turned, and the humpbacked priest himself stood in their presence.

"Ha!" he uttered as he noticed the position of the invalid. "Up? By the holy Virgin, you are recovering!"

"Aye," returned Conrad; "I am gaining fast now, as you may see."

The priest struggled hard with his feelings, and at length he managed to conceal the deep disappointment he felt—that is, he hid it from Stephen's eyes, but the count knew him too well.

"You have not been very punctual of late, father," the latter said, also trying to conceal his real feelings.

"No, no," returned Savotano in a perplexed manner; "I admit it. But the fact is I have been called away. Let's see. I have not been here since the evening on which I found a stranger sitting by your side while you were asleep."

"Who was the stranger?"

"I don't know. I think I never saw him before. He was a good looking young man. Perhaps he was some relative of yours?"

This downright falsehood, so bold and flagrant, astonished even the count, for he knew the conversation which the priest had held with Ruric on that occasion, and, quick as lightning, too, went the thought to the sick man's mind that this was to hide the probability of his being suspected in connection with Ruric's disappearance.

"I thought you knew that man," the count said, looking the priest sharply in the face.

"No, I may have seen him before, but I did not surely recognize him then. I asked him why he was here, but he would not answer me save by urging me to silence. Who was he, my son?"

The count was at first inclined not to answer, but he thought better of it and finally told the priest that it was Ruric Nevel. The villain seemed much surprised at this and professed to wonder why the fellow should come to that place. Urzen, who knew nothing of the falsehood which rested under all this questioning, went on and explained the nature of Ruric's mission and its result. And thereupon Savotano expressed a wondrous degree of joy and gratification, and he even presumed to bless God that such a reconciliation had taken place.

"And now," the priest resumed, after this matter had been disposed of, "how happened this sudden change in your disease, my son? The doctors thought you dying when I was here last."

"Yes, I know," answered the count, still hiding the deep disgust that moved within him; "but a new physician was called in, and he prescribed a new medicine. He said the medicine I had been taking was unsuited to my case, and so he gave me new. You can see the result."

"Yes, I see," was the reply, "and as you seem to have very good company I'll take my leave. I have several calls to make tonight."

The count made no reply to this, and as the priest found that he was not urged to remain he arose at once. He stopped twice before he reached the door, but in neither case did he speak. As soon as he gained the street he turned toward the upper part of the city, and he stopped not until he had reached the palace of the Duke of Tula. The old porter admitted him without question, and he made his way at once to the hall, where he inquired for the duke. One of the servants went in search of his master, and when he returned he bade the priest follow him.

The duke was in his private room, and as soon as the servant had withdrawn he bade his visitor take a seat.

"Now, Savotano, how is it?" he asked. "Have you seen the count?"

"Aye; I am from there now. By all that's bad, my lord, the villain is gaining!"

"Gaining?" repeated Olga, with surprise. "But you assured me he was well nigh gone."

"So he was, so he was. But he is recovering now."

"But how is it?"

"Why, he tells me he had a new physician and that the old medicine was all condemned and an entire new course prescribed."

"And under this new treatment he is recovering, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, have you not taken some measures to fix this new medicine? By the gods, Savotano, you must not let him slip now!"

"Ah, my lord, I have only told you how he explained the matter. I have another explanation."

"What is it, sir priest?"

"Why, they simply know that some one has attempted to poison the count."

"Ha! Did they say anything?"

"No; there was no need. I know that the medicine he was taking before was the right kind of medicine, so far as it came from the hands of the surgeon. And then there is another thing—the count must have had some powerful antidote on purpose for the poison."

"How do you know that?"

"Simply because he would not have now been alive had not such been the case. You may be sure, my lord, that they know poison has been administered. They have discovered it in some way and taken the most effective and speedy method to overcome it. I know this."

"And do you think they suspect you?" the duke asked, with some show of uneasiness.

"I don't know; but I fear they do. However, that amounts to nothing—only to prevent me from working any further at present in the same direction. I have not laid myself open to detection in any way. By heavens, 'tis too bad! In four and twenty hours more he would have been a dead man."

"Then you know when the discovery was made?"

"Yes, on the afternoon before Ruric Nevel was captured. I was there just before night, and the gunmaker was then there, and I noticed that the vials were gone from the table, though I gave no signs then of having noticed it. They had even then commenced some treatment for his cure, for I could see that the appearance of his skin had changed. You must not blame me."

"I do not, Savotano; but there may be some way left yet."

"Oh, yes; there are a hundred ways in which we can dispose of him. But I may find some way yet before he gets out."

"Look ye," the duke said after a short pondering over his own thoughts; "you must watch every chance. Something may turn up in our favor. You may find some opportunity to finish him yet. I wish you could."

"I will do all I can, be sure of that. I shall watch narrowly. And, now, about the other one. Young Nevel is safe and can be disposed of at any moment. I have let him live thus far because I had no orders otherwise."

"Aye; that was right," replied Olga. And as he did so he arose and commenced to pace the room. The priest followed him with his eyes, but said nothing. At length the duke stopped and looked Savotano in the face.

"It would not be a difficult case to kill him," he uttered in a low whisper.

"Not at all. Nothing could be more easy."

"And could detection ensue?"

"In no possible way."

"Then—"

"Listen," spoke the humpback as Olga hesitated. "I strongly suspect that 'twas this same gunmaker that led to the investigation of that medicine, and if it was he then you will be more quickly suspected than I shall."

"Ha! Why think ye so?"

"Because he is a fellow of wondrous wit and intelligence and can see without being told. He has had several conferences here, and it was from here that he went direct to the count's residence. He knows by this time why the duel was hatched up, and if he has half the mind I give him credit for he will know that you are at the bottom of the poisoning business. I am sure of this."

"By heavens, you are right, Savotano! Let him die!"

"I had thought myself that would be the best way, for if he were at large you would not be safe."

"You can have him killed without noise or disturbance?"

"I think so," replied the priest, with a wicked smile. "At all events, his noise would not hurt any one, for he is rather too far away from the world to make himself heard."

"Where is he?"

"Why, where you recommended—in the farthest vault beneath your old bathing house, and that is a place where he cannot be readily found."

"And what disposition can you make of the body after the work is done?"